

ANDREAS C. HOFMANN

**Old English Dialects
The Question of Standardisation**

Vortragspaper aus dem Jahre 2004

Dateiabruf unter:

<http://www.aussichten-online.net>

[11.11.2012]

Old English Dialects: The Question of Standardisation

0. Definitions

- *Dialects* are a language variety spoken in a certain region or social class which differ in pronunciation, morphology, syntax, lexicology etc. Common differentiation between *regional dialects (dialects)* and *social dialects (sociolects)*. *Dialects* are a *diatopic* subsystem of the English language.
- *Isogloss* is the boundary of a singular (phonological, phonetic, lexical, grammatical etc.) dialectal feature. In modern languages dialectal boundary can be determined where several different *isoglosses* cooccur to an isogloss bundle.
- *Dialectology* is the study of variation in language, which tries to find out correlations between linguistic and extralinguistic features. When examining a modern language community, the dialectologist has *living informants* and modern devices for collecting his data and determining the *isoglosses*.

1. Dialects in Old English

- For the OE time there is no evidence for other than regional kinds (e.g. sociolects) of dialectal variation.

1.1. Regional distribution

- The OE dialect regions correlate with the settlement regions of the Germanic tribes that occupied the British Isles in the 5th century.
- Therefore we can differentiate with *Northumbrian*, *Mercian*, *West-Saxon* and *Kentish* four dialects, whereas Northumbrian and Mercian are sometimes collectively called *Anglian* as they have several linguistic features in common.

1.2. Determination of dialect boundaries and dialect reconstruction

- When studying historical language varieties, you have less direct methods (surveys, modern technology etc.) available. The main sources are comparisons to / between better proved dialects and written records.
- As *ME dialects*, which developed from the OE ones, are better proved, they can be used to reconstruct the OE status. Additionally, the OE dialect boundaries correlate with the *ME* ones.
- The most important sources for the determination of OE dialect boundaries and the reconstruction of OE dialects are *written records*. When using such written records we have to consider that there was no standardised writing in OE times. In addition, we can in most cases only assign time and place. We do not know much about the scribes' origins, social status, intention etc.

2. Sources for OE Dialects

- When classifying OE texts, we have to consider that we can only roughly assign them to a certain time or place. Therefore the following table can only give a rough overview. In most cases, the division into four regions correlates with the four dialects. The dates in brackets show the time of significant supremacy.
 - North ≈ Northumbrian (625-675)
 - Midlands ≈ Mercian (650-825)
 - Southwest ≈ West-Saxon (800-1050)
 - Southeast ≈ Kentish (archiepiscopal see of Canterbury)

Date / Region	North	Midlands	Southwest	Southeast
675	(Rune Auzon)			
700	(PsScholia, RuthCr)	(Ch), EpGl		
725	Bede, (Cæd, BDS)	(Ch)		
750	(LRid)	Bede, (Ch)		(Ch)
775		(Ch, BlGl), ErfGl		(Ch)
800		CorpGl		
825		VPs , LorPr, LorGl		(Ch)
850			(Ch)	
875			(Ch, Gn, Mart)	Ch, (Med)
900			CP, ASC	
925			Or, ASC	
950		RoyGl	ASC , (Med)	Ch, KtHy, KtGl, KtPs
975	Ru2, Li, DurRit	Ru1		

- Example: The KtHy, KtPs and KtGl share linguistic features with ME dialects which are clearly Kentish. Therefore these texts can be used to reconstruct more about south-eastern varieties.

3. Dialect features: orthographic and phonological variation

Example: Variation of the West Germanic /a:/

West Germanic	Prehistoric Old English	West Saxon	Other (Mercian, Kentish)
/a:/	/æ:/	/æ:/ → remains	/e:/ → raised ‘the second fronting’ even though it’s rather a raising than a fronting

Examples:

	West Saxon	Northumbrian	Mercian	Kentish
‘broke’	bræcon	brēcon	brēcon	brēcon
➔ variation of West Germanic /a:/				
‘vessel’ (Gefäß)	fæt / fatas	fæt / fatas	fet	fæt / fatas
➔ West Germanic /a:/ can remain /a/ in open syllables followed by a back vowel				
‘old’	eald	ald	ald	eald
➔ fronted /æ/ was retracted to /a/ in general Anglian (NH, M) texts before [l + consonant]				

4. The question of standardization

- ‘Standard’: a variation of language, which appears of language as communication (*lingua franca*) for all regional dialect areas.
- Usually one existing subsystem of dialects ‘wins’ through against the other subsystems or a mixture of subsystems develops.
- Historical / political background:
 - political independence of the South after Scandinavian invasion (*Danelaw* in the North) by King Alfred
 - Alfred forces cultural development: translation of Latin works into OE prose (but not yet a standard)
 - Alfred’s own translations phonologically not standardised ➔ Alfred sets political and cultural basis for a standard
 - Aethelwold’s (Bishop of Winchester) dialect was West Saxon
 - Aethelwold and his school in Winchester developed an organised standard. Aelfric, who was Aethelwold’s student used late West Saxon standard in all homilies
 - Late West Saxon is made the basis for the studies of Old English

5. Further Development

- After becoming a standard speech of England, the late West Saxon standard was cut short by the Norman Conquest, which reduced all dialects to a common level of unimportance.
- The new Standard arising in the late ME period was based on an Anglian dialect of the East Midlands.

Appendix A: Literature

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- TOON, Thomas E. (1992), “Old English Dialects”, in: *CHEL* vol. 1, ed. Richard M. Hogg, Cambridge, p. 409-451.
- *The Blackwell encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Michael LAPIDGE et. al., s.vv. "Dialect", "West-Saxon Dialect", Oxford et.al. 1999.

Appendix B: Abbreviations

ASC	Anglo Saxon Chronicle
BDS	Bede's Death Song
Bede	Bede <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
BIGl	Blickling Psalter
CA	Codex Aureus
Cæd	Cædmon's Hymn
Ch	Charters
CorpGl	Corpus Glosses
CP	<i>Cura Pastoralis</i>
DurRit	Durham Ritual
EpGl	Epinal Glosses
ErfGl	Erfurt Glosses
Gn	Royal Genealogies
KtGl	Glosses to Proverbs
KtHy	Kentish Hymn
KtPs	Kentish Psalm
Li	Lindsfarne Gospels
LorGl	Lorica Glosses
LorPr	Lorica Prayer
LRid	Leiden Riddle
Mart	Martyrology fragments
Med	Medicinal recipes
Or	<i>Orosius</i>
PsScholia	Vatican Manuscript
Ru1	Mark and John
Ru2	Rushworth Gospels
Rune Auzon	Franks Casket
RuthCr	Ruthwell Cross
VPs	Vespasian psalter